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## WHY NOT TEACH FRESHMEN?

BY STANLEY T. WILLIAMS

SAY what you like about teaching, *I* intend to teach. For one thing, I like to teach Freshmen. I like to teach them chiefly because they are not Sophomores. I have taught Sophomores, too, and that is fun; I should not dare to become sniffy about Sophomores. I am a very young man, and they might put me in my place; or out of it. Only yesterday one of them remarked, earnestly: "Sir, don't you think Sophomores have an air of careless grandeur?" Nobody would affirm that a Freshman had "careless grandeur." Everyone concedes "grand" and all its cognates to Sophomores. The Freshman is not grand, or grandiose, or grandiloquent; he's just Freshman; he is *sui generis*. College "men"—a debutante friend forces me to say "men"; college "boys", she says, belong to the 'eighties, and are found only in musical comedies—declare: "He's a Freshman," precisely as girls say damningly, "He's a married man"; or, turnabout, as married men classify, "He's a bachelor." In each case reference is made to a species. When you mention the fact that your nephew is a Junior, you allude to a technicality in the curriculum; when you call him a Freshman, you characterize a condition of society. A type? How terrible? Not at all. Tadpoles are not morbid about being tadpoles; froghood is near. And for the Freshman—well, there is the approaching beatitude of "careless grandeur." In fact the Freshman is so important that one eastern university has segregated him. Talk with him of college. You gain a faint premonition of three other years, but somehow you learn that there is only one year, and that is the Freshman Year.

For the first months the Freshman is hopelessly hybrid; he does not yet belong to the University. The right tailor, the right talk, the right tobacco—these he embraces blindly, passionately. He is a neophyte in orthodoxy. Part of him is still on

the farm, or in a high school in one of those large rectangular States in the middle of our map, or on the athletic field of St. Numbskull's. The truth is, his mind is in short trousers, though he has craftily covered his legs. In small colleges he wears a cap, its ugliness focusing in a button, a burlesque *biretta*; in universities he is ignored. Both procedures are superfluous; you can tell a Freshman as readily as a Paris *cicerone* can spot a tourist. Being a Freshman is a state of mind made glaringly public. Like Longfellow's maiden, his feet are where the brook and river meet; not, however, in the least reluctant, but eager, and fearfully well-shod. No longer boy, not yet man; between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born.

But let others sing the glories of the Freshman on the campus. My epic is of the combat with him in the class-room, and of the Achilles-hero-instructor who meets him there. When I first meet him in 200 Sampson Hall, he is a bit uncertain, but desperately alert. His attention is strained, intense, and has, I cynically realize, nothing to do with what I am saying. He is examining *me*. When Abelard, like millions of professors before and after him, sketched the "nature and scope" of the course—that academic *ignis fatuus*!—his Freshmen, I am convinced, scrutinized his face, his hands, his cuffs, his socks—if Abelard went in for socks. My Freshman is in front of me, his moon-face in an orgy of concentration. So gaze the undoubting at the miracle of St. Januarius. I stare back, quite inadequate. Surely such devotion merits more than an assignment in *Henry IV*, Part 1. Ought I not to stand on the desk and sing to such zealots?

Just then I have a Vision of Truth. For I comprehend that though the Freshman would be mildly surprised, if I sang, he would give no sign. What he has been examining is not my remarks on the text, nor even, fundamentally, my socks, but his new college, one aspect of which has become deceitfully incarnate in me. To him for a moment I am Harvard, Princeton, Yale. Before this thought cynicism vanishes. This awkward, shy, eager, kindly specimen before me, this astounding blend of malleable impulses, this irritating, delightful baby, is at my college, waiting and hoping. He has become part of that fellowship which I revere. He is an idealist. At last he has "got in" to

the University, the University, perhaps, of generations of his family. He is on his mettle, and he means to "make good." And on my side is the consciousness of the keenness of his attitude. It is a challenge to give of my best that I dare not refuse, even if I incredibly wished to do so. And our relations are already appallingly personal. There is no whiskered parent in the background cutting a club about my size; no elderly matron, she of the lorgnette. These are in Alameda, California, praying for John's success in this very course.

I do not mean to say that this first, fine rapture endures. The mere fact of being in college will not maintain that ecstatic attention of the first day. An ideal realized is an ideal created; in this case the ideal is to attain "careless grandeur"; to be like an upper-classman. In April or May I remind this Sophomoric crowd, by a tactful insult or two, who they are. Falstaff's most maddening taunt to Mistress Quickly was: "Go to! you are a woman." I employ the same artistic economy of epithet: "Go to! you are a Freshman." This is effective. But if sophistication sets in, there is a compensation. The first day I peered over my desk I saw merely long-legged bodies crowned by apple-cheeked faces expressing a dauntless faith in Santa Claus. But now I behold individuals. Jack Sanford's face is like Ruskin's at the age of twelve, but his brain is stubborn; he exhibits a singular resistance to knowledge. He played baseball at school. How he hopes I will let him out to play this afternoon! Next him is Bob Ring, *ætat.* 24, with two years' service in the First Division as a cultural background. "When do we finally know that Charlotte Corday means to kill Marat?" I once demanded. "Oh, not till she sticks him in the last chapter!" Bob roared. I am now *æsthetically* blunted to Collins's evil taste in scarves. Murphy's smile is not unwelcome. In brief, the compensation is that I know my men. There has been a Ragnarök. That mysterious thing has developed called "the personality of the class."

But this epic, I repeat, deals with the instructor. How does he teach them? "What does he do in there?" I heard a student ask another concerning a teacher. "Oh, he talks,—you know," came the reply; "wind, of course; rising and falling action—that stuff!" Then the speaker suddenly raised his head,

dripping, from a basin of cold water. His voice was uncomfortably loud as he added: "But I keep awake. Do this every day before I go to class." That's just it. What do we do in there? Well, sometimes it is a pedagogical three-ring circus, and we admit it, though the details of such horrors shall not be revealed in this paper. There is, for instance, the daily paper; like, if I may be ironical, a Greek tragedy; regular in its beginning, inexorable in its ending, and possessing a purification through suffering. For ten minutes Pity and Terror are supreme. Then there are questions, penetrative, Socratic, flooding the student's mind with intellectual light, leaving him breathless, wistful, sad with the whole of pleasure. (How I wish you would believe this true!) The hour flows on majestic, like the River Oxus, and the Freshman, shedding a tear, leaves the room with bowed head.

Oh, does he? Alas! not in my divisions. Not a bow. Nor a Socratic question. Unless you call this Socratic: "Now, what did he do next?" Or this: "Mercutio drew his sword, advanced, and attacked—whom, Mr. Flatfoot?" I am not defending these inanities; I merely find them necessary—sometimes.

Here, by implication, two ways of handling the young animal have been indicated; one, a toy Socratic dialogue, with its infinite possibilities of inspiring or falling flat, and the other, an alphabetical examination of the text. I shall mention two or three other ways of instruction, coercive or persuasive, and state in advance that I think these, however important, only corollaries in teaching Freshmen. *Porro unum necessarium!* The greatest of these is—something else!

One of these ways is a great pother about technique, as some teachers like to call it. Their aim is to evoke a startled interest, and their legerdemain rivals that of a Belasco stage-manager. The nuances of this black art are magnificent. Two of my brethren once arrived at a bitter impasse concerning the particular position of the instructor when teaching the balcony scenes in *Romeo and Juliet*. From the back of the room? Billiken-like on the desk? (Here I suggested the pirouette, but was ruled out as a profane spirit.) In studying Tennyson's *Lotus Eaters* realism is the thing: "What *I* do," said one of these, with definite implication, "is to close every window, draw the curtains, turn on the

heat, and then read the poem in a dreamy voice. When I finish," triumphantly, "every man in the room is asleep." This was superb. Next to distributing lotus-blossoms, what could be better?

Then, too, the art of bullying has its votaries. If a written paper is a split-second late, it is dramatically dropped into the waste-basket. To look out of the window means zero; to whisper to a neighbor is a recitation, a valueless one, and so zero; and to borrow a pencil is zero. Under this *régime* the object of the wretched class becomes to raise its general average to zero. Football captains have been known to achieve as high as forty below zero, or by super-effort to reach exactly zero. In all this there is something of the humor of Tantalus, and something of the grimness of Pusey's conception of sin. Yet such terrorism has tickled the fancy of many students. Under this Prussianism they have grown and prospered. They increase in sorrow, but in knowledge also.

By all these devices I am interested, but not wholly convinced. One man may throw chalk at his Freshmen; another may sing under his breath; still another may teach, amid roars of laughter, with his foot in the waste-basket. Some of these things are for me in teaching my young cubs, but they are secondary. I am persuaded that the essence of it all is something else; and, trite and vague as it may be, this I intend to examine. It is the mysterious *unum necessarium* on which I found my faith as a teacher, and of which I intend to speak. This means a digression, or rather a retrogression. It means a brief *résumé* of the training of the college teacher.

When at graduation from college he announced to his friend in business that he intended to teach, the latter remarked: "If you don't know what to do, teach; if you don't know what to teach, why, teach English." In this case, at least, the pleasantry was irrelevant. We are talking not of the drifter, but of the man—there are some—who wishes to teach. He cares for it so definitely, that he submits to the Ph.D. At the end of one year of a three years' sentence he is in a welter of books,—books, books, and books about books. He recalls now with understanding the fervor of the undergraduate in chapel as he pronounced the verse;

"Of the making of many books there is no end! Selah!" One night he dreams he is a vast cistern, deep as Mahomet's Hell, into which are being poured the libraries of the universe. Classmates returning wither him with crusades of practical achievement. "Three more years of study, eh?" they comment quizzically. He overhears two undergraduates discussing "that bird who looks as if he slept in a swamp"—undeniably a fellow graduate student. At a convention of teachers he hears, "I shall always remember my graduate years; they were the most melancholy years of—" "Of a melancholy life," the eavesdropper adds *sotto voce*. He is weakening. How about the grain and feed business?

At the end of the second year the water has crept higher. The man who wished to teach Freshmen has a University fellowship, but no other, in any sense. He now has to select a subject for his thesis, and he wavers between two seductions: *The Whale in English Literature*, or *A Correlated Study of the Cells in the Hind-Legs of Grasshoppers in the More Biological of the English Poets*. This delicate decision, he is told, involves his whole future happiness. Where is the young man who wished to teach English literature to boys? Isn't he just a little bit frayed? Well—how about selling bonds?

But at last teaching begins, and he likes it, even in this first year, the trying year of dress-rehearsal. But there are other quicksands. He is requested to publish a vermiform appendix to his thesis. In addition he is put on the Committee for the Direction of Intra-Curriculum Passivity, which is to report to the chairman *pro tem* of the faculty as an acting committee of the whole whether pen and ink or pencil should be used in final examinations. He discovers that Carlyle was wrong: a university is not a collection of books, but a nest of committees. He spends his week-ends counting commas in the college catalogue which is to be delivered to an anxious world with a revised table of contents. One evening he attends the reading of a paper on *The Origin of the Expression, "Cold Feet," in the Early Piedmontese Dialect*. On the moonlit campus below some boys begin to sing. Listen. It is that exquisite lyric of George Withers's, written centuries ago in a quiet English library; it rises, dauntless, plaintively entreating, "Shall I wa-a-sting in despair—" borne into the

room on the fresh voices of youth. A young savant looks up over bone spectacles, rises, and closes the window with a bang. Philology triumphant!

Again at home, in more or less sybaritic apartments in Lost Divinity Hall, darkness floods the young man's soul. He is impelled to cable for Thomas Hardy, so many are the evening's little ironies. For as he picks up a current magazine he opens to an airing of the professorial budget; and, without stirring, he can read the last words of a letter from a classmate, lying on the table: ". . . shame . . . you fellows should be better paid. . . ." But the perfect moment is yet to be his. He opens a letter from a maiden aunt, and reads a clipping from a school journal, the *opus* of a Western Superintendent of Schools:

In my many years of teaching work I have found a thousand reasons to rejoice and be glad that I am a teacher. I am glad each year when the time draws near for the new school year to begin; I am glad when the day finally arrives; I am glad to hear the school bells ring, calling the boys and girls back to their books and their work; I am glad to meet them skipping gleefully on their way to school; glad again to meet and greet their teachers. . . . I am glad to visit the class-rooms and see the eagerness and joy with which they pursue their work, strengthening the chords of effort in their desire to achieve and excel. . . . I am glad when the day's work is over and doubly glad when the new day begins. Yes, it's a wonderful thing to be a teacher—teaching is a labor of love, it's a labor of joy.

The clipping vanishes into a crumpled ball, and outside his door two Armenians and a negro divinity student are startled by a burst of sardonic and hellish laughter.

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It is just here that the *unum necessarium* plays its part. Love of technique in the class-room, and mild interest in teaching, will never survive the discouragements which have just been outlined in this brief biography of the instructor. The real test of a teacher is in these darker moments. Does he now wish to meet these youngsters again, and daily? If not, then by all means, hurrah for the grain and feed business, and quickly! But this particular individual does; in fact he could not give it up. He even thinks of the row of young faces of the next morning—this dark mood past—with something very like content. He realizes



that in spite of theses, committees, salaries, there is something which makes him wish to teach Freshmen. This something he cannot name, though he regards it as an *élan vital*. Perhaps it is not unlike "keeping the faith"; perhaps it is merely a twist in his brain; perhaps this entire paper demonstrates a platitude—the value of enthusiasm. Perhaps it is only that. But in teaching it is first and, relatively, the other things are nowhere. This is vague, but it is certain. The soul of a recitation with Freshmen is the will and spirit to teach them. Only last week an older teacher said to me, with a kind of battle fury in his eye: "I could teach 'em. I used to feel, 'Let me get in there!'" (I thought of King Lear's boast: "I have seen the time when with my good biting falchion I could make 'em skip.")

So, after all, the sentiment of the school superintendent is relevant. Something may be said for the joys of the flesh, but these do not compare favorably with the joys of a good recitation with Freshmen. After such the teacher floats lightly down the stairs and across the campus with thoughts like those of the gods. Sometimes he feels like turning to his Freshmen—by no means every day!—and saying confidentially: "You know—I like this game, for many reasons, but the real charm of it is *you*."

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